

IMEX Environmental focus group – new insights

In July 2004 IMEX invited MICE buyers to share their views on green issues as a 'virtual' contribution to an environmental focus group. The exercise was repeated in July 2005 and findings follow. The views of approximately 70 respondents from 11 countries (USA, Europe, Middle East, Africa) are incorporated.

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Focus group opinions suggest that more meetings and incentive travel buyers are reacting thoughtfully, and increasingly, to perceived environmental change. Asked which eco-practices they have applied to their events, respondents revealed the following sequence (rounded figures):

* Recycling of conference material	80%
* Viewing wilderness or animal conservation areas	73%
* Selected an hotel known for its environmental programme	71%
* Involvement of an inspirational speaker on the environment	53%
* Selected an airline/cruise company known for its green credentials	51%
* Undertaking fund-raising or other support for green causes	41%

Significant changes compared to last year are a stronger commitment to recycling; an increase in viewing wildlife/wilderness areas; and the wider use at conferences of inspirational speakers on environmental topics.

Such findings suggest that the perceived problems of apparent global warming and climate change are beginning to be taken seriously. It follows a six-month period in which news headlines have been dominated by cases of excessive (and uncharacteristic) heat, drought, floods, monsoons, and wind conditions. Examples of extreme weather have occurred in Europe, the United States, Australia, India and elsewhere.

poor record

A further outcome may be a new resolve of many buyers to avoid destinations and venues 'known to have a poor record for environmental issues'. Comments include: 'every right-thinking person would act this way'; 'why use a destination today that you further damage for tomorrow'; and 'there was not widespread concern over this in the past, but the issue is now becoming more prevalent and our responsibility is growing.' A practical response was that of the agency who advised a client against a favoured hotel because it was not in a good area due to the problem of excessive fumes.

It is perhaps for such reasons that MICE buyers may be becoming more receptive to the idea of a destination 'eco-tax' that would be invested in managing for sustainability. Almost half (46%) are willing to discuss the idea, with remarks including 'even a small tax would 'get' everyone, and not rely on voluntary efforts'; and 'it is our generation's responsibility to preserve the environment for the future'. Others comment that 'such a levy must be properly explained to visitors', and 'yes, as long as we know how it is being spent'. In contrast, some organisers worry that corrupt or inefficient governments will waste the money, or that their political mindsets could change. Another opinion is that an eco-tax 'should be a general way of life, and not an additional burden on the end-user'.

bigger issue

Meetings and incentive travel buyers strongly recognise (say 74%) that the environment 'will become a bigger issue in the coming years'. This they explain owes to 'front page focus in the media'; 'the role of education which is fostering a generation of well-informed young people'; and not least, 'because of the further damage and destruction that is arising from industrial pollution, strip mining, mass land clearance, deforestation etc.'. A common view is that 'mankind cannot always

take, but also has to give'. A worry is that 'there are too many economic and political self-interests'. One buyer argued that 'we have to do something because nature is striking back'. A typical overall conclusion is that 'addressing the issue will open up dialogue and prepare this industry for an appropriate response'.

advanced thinking model

There is already a sense (organisers report) that meetings delegates and incentive participants will in future 'show their concern if environmental issues are not taken into account when planning their events'. This is a view now shared by 58% of buyers, a figure which might be expected to grow. On the other hand, some doubt whether delegates 'will care nearly enough', with one explanation being that 'they are not yet sufficiently aware of the consequences'. One especially thoughtful answer referred to the way cruise lines make reference to the problem to their passengers, and how Boeing position their new aircraft as being environmentally-friendly. This specialist adds that such an 'advanced thinking model' will be further helped 'if more companies which have global name recognition share this approach'. Another emerging position is that of the buyer who argues 'whilst I cannot possibly agree that delegates are yet becoming more influential, I sincerely wish they would'.

governments

Governments in countries benefiting from strong MICE demand were offered advice on initiatives that they should be taking to help. Examples include further legislation and funding to protect the environment, the increased use of sustainable energy, and more emphasis on advising people in emerging countries how to live in harmony with the environment in order to benefit from business tourism. Tighter government policies on procurement would be an effective management control, as would tougher powers to ensure the implementation of agreed policies. Countries should do more to share experiences of best environmental practice. More challenging is the recommended pre-requisite to slow down the consumption of fossil fuels, and be more transparent and less politically-motivated in their initiatives to achieve this.

tips

Advice and tips that IMEX buyers offer to the wider MICE industry include: get more (financially and practically) involved with the work of eco-organisations; keep travel down to a practical minimum; select only eco-sensitive destinations; plan lots of

opportunities during events to inform attendees of potential damage to environments; and not least, to boycott suppliers who don't appear to care. Also proposed is an annual eco-conference for the meetings industry which would provide a forum for the necessary environmental leadership within the industry.

Ends.